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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: WITH A/S WELCH, GEAGEA PRESSES HALF PLUS
ONE

REF: BEIRUT 1950

Classified By: Charge William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Visiting NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch delivered three messages to Lebanese Forces head and March 14 leader Samir Geagea on December 15: one, the time has come to elect a new president; two, those in charge should take responsibility for solving the impasse, and if they don't, the U.S. will hold them responsible for blocking the election; and three, March 14 must stay united, strong, and determined.

2. (C) Geagea argued that March 14 is facing erosion, but can survive if it confronts Hizballah and pursues choosing a president with the half plus one approach. March 14 was united in supporting Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman, he said, but because Hizballah and Syria are after more than just the Lebanese presidency, it needs a new course of action. Geagea believes Syria will continue obstructing the election, ordering Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri to call for "fake sessions" until the current legislative session ends December 31.

3. (C) Geagea argued that March 14 should prepare to elect a president with a half plus one majority immediately after December 31. He appealed to A/S Welch to convey to his March 14 partner Walid Jumblatt, whose determination to stand against Syria is wavering, he claimed, encouragement to stay strong. Geagea stressed that the success of a half plus one election depends on the firm support of the U.S. and its European allies, accompanied by public finger-pointing at Syria. Geagea blamed the December 12 assassination of General Francois al-Hajj on LAF G-2 Intelligence ineffectiveness. End summary.

REASSURING MARCH 14

4. (C) Visiting NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch met with Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea and his wife, MP Setrida Geagea, at their residence in Marab on December 15. Welch explained that after not sending a high-level USG official to Lebanon for some time to avoid appearances of U.S. interference in the election, Secretary Rice requested him to come at this time to deliver three messages. First, the U.S. wants to see a resolution on the political impasse, and now is the time to elect a new president. Secondly, those in

charge should take responsibility for solving the impasse, and if they don't, the U.S. will hold them accountable. Third, March 14 should remain strong, united, and determined. Adding that the U.S. considers Lebanon a best friend, Welch said it will not leave Lebanon to fall to Syria, nor will it strike any deals with Syria at Lebanon's expense.

MUSIC TO GEAGEA'S EARS

15. (C) Geagea, calling A/S Welch's words "music to my ears," recounted that initially he was opposed to Michel Sleiman's candidacy for president because he was reluctant to amend the constitution and to have a military figure as president. After President Lahoud's November 23 departure, the pressure to fill the presidential vacuum changed his mind, and he accepted Sleiman as March 14's candidate. Geagea said he was then stunned to find out that Sleiman was not accepted by the opposition.

16. (C) Interjecting that the U.S. supported March 14's decision to nominate Sleiman as a consensus candidate, A/S Welch said there is a limit to how much March 14 should concede in order to get a president. He assured Geagea that the U.S. will not let Syria regain control of Lebanon, adding that Syria is run by dinosaurs and one day the dinosaurs will be extinct.

BERRI IS CALLING FOR A "FAKE SESSION"

17. (C) Asked about contingency planning should the next parliamentary session to elect a president, currently scheduled for December 17, fall through, Geagea said he did

not believe parliament would meet on December 17, labeling Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri's decision to hold a parliamentary session a "fake session." A legislative session to amend the constitution needs to take place before there can be an electoral session, he explained. In calling for an electoral session, Berri is not serious about the election, and can continue to call for "fake sessions" until the current legislative session ends on December 31.

SYRIA: EYES ON KEY LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

18. (C) Geagea suspected Syria's ultimate goal was never the presidency, but other important slots in the government, which the president has a role in deciding, such as the prime minister, the new LAF Commander, and the head of LAF G-2 Intelligence. He said Syria has been preparing the Palestinian Liberation Army by arming them in camps bordering Lebanon, and fears Syria is preparing for a "final assault" on Lebanon.

SLEIMAN SUBJECT TO SYRIAN BLACKMAIL

19. (C) Although he supported Sleiman, Geagea voiced concern that Sleiman would be pressured daily by Syria and eventually could cave. Since the presidency has become a tangible reality for Sleiman, Geagea argued, he might be inclined to accept some conditions in order to seal the deal on his election. The December 12 assassination of LAF G-3 Operations Director Francois al-Hajj (reftel) was a message to Sleiman, and he could be feeling the threat, Geagea warned.

EROSION OF MARCH 14

110. (C) The acceptance of Sleiman as president and the subsequent rejection by the opposition were part of a series of defeats for March 14, according to Geagea. He confessed that even the rank and file March 14 MPs can no longer be

counted on to support a March 14 decision. He guessed that March 14 has about one to two weeks left before public opinion turns against it, and then the situation will be hopeless, in what he dubbed an "erosion of March 14."

PREPARING FOR HALF PLUS ONE

¶11. (C) Geagea argued that March 14 had no alternative but to prepare immediately to elect a president. While still amenable to a Sleiman candidacy, Geagea said that if it doesn't happen by December 31, March 14 should elect a president with a half plus one majority.

¶12. (C) Recognizing the threat of chaos that could accompany a half plus one election, Geagea nevertheless firmly believed the survival of March 14 depended on confronting the opposition with a half plus one majority. He argued that street fighting may not ensue, if the army is firm, which is increasingly likely since he sees the army becoming more supportive of March 14. If the army wavers, Geagea stated, "We will have to go to the streets."

¶13. (C) Politically, Hizballah's response will be to denounce the new president, Geagea predicted, and prevent the formation of a new government. He continued, "But then at least we will have a new president and a caretaker government; we will have two legs instead of the one we stand on today."

¶14. (C) Geagea noted, however, that it was important to respect Sleiman, and therefore wait until after December 31 to pursue a half plus one majority. He said that March 14 leaders should communicate with Sleiman so that he understands that he cannot become president after that point.

The next step, he continued, would be to elect a half plus one president and immediately move him into the presidential residence at Baabda. Such a move would prove invaluable in terms of securing Christian public opinion for March 14 and usurping public opinion from Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun. Geagea believed the Patriarch would welcome the new president and a majority of the population would follow suit.

JUMBLATT NEEDS CONVINCING

¶14. (C) Believing most of March 14 is on board with a half plus one majority, Geagea singled out Druse leader Walid Jumblatt as the main objector, explaining that Jumblatt fears the Druse regions will be the first to be attacked by Hizballah in a confrontation. Geagea agreed that this was a realistic threat, but said it applied to the Christians as well if they confront Hizballah. Geagea explained, "If we avoid Hizballah, we empower it. However, the more we confront Hizballah, the more reluctant it will be."

¶15. (C) Setrida Geagea implored A/S Welch to repeat to Jumblatt the U.S. messages of support. He needs the most convincing, she said, and the U.S. is best positioned to influence him. She added it would be helpful if the same message were conveyed to MP and majority leader Saad Hariri, but that a different message should be given to Berri, who she believed suspected the U.S. of designing March 14's strategies.

THE U.S. AND FRANCE NEED TO POINT FINGERS

¶16. (C) Samir Geagea believed the U.S. and Europe should play a major role in pressuring Syria to stop interfering. He was not optimistic about French support for a half plus one decision, but believed the U.S. could coordinate with France to publicly point fingers at Syria and finger it for hindering elections. March 14 can succeed with a half plus one majority if the U.S. will support it, Geagea argued.

¶17. (C) A/S Welch responded that he was in Lebanon to support March 14, but not to make decisions for it; March 14 leaders should decide among themselves, and should strive foremost for unity. The U.S. stands for the principle of the democratic majority, and believes in Lebanon's democratic institutions. It will therefore press certain individuals, such as Speaker Berri, to fulfill the demands required by their role. He added that the U.S. already has imposed nearly every sanction possible on Syria, and was pushing the international community to adopt similar measures.

BLAMES ASSASSINATION ON
INTELLIGENCE FAILURE

¶18. (C) Geagea questioned how the attack on al-Hajj could have taken place "in the backyard" of the LAF G-2 Intelligence. G-2 is responsible for investigating the assassination, Geagea said, but the string of assassinations plaguing Lebanon suggests it is ineffective. He said the G-2 never looks into Syrian networks and therefore is unable to know who is behind the assassinations. A/S Welch responded that the Special Tribunal to investigate former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's assassination should help with the investigations.

¶19. (C) Geagea acknowledged that al-Hajj's assassination could have occurred because Syria wants someone other than al-Hajj to become the commander if Sleiman is elected president. He rejected the theory that someone would have killed al-Hajj for personal ambition. Geagea said the intelligence branch is problematic and requires major restructuring. Otherwise, he warned, assassinations will continue. Geagea expressed his disapproval for the candidate he suspects Sleiman is considering to head G-2 (Jean Kahwagi).

¶20. (U) A/S Welch has not cleared this cable.
GRANT